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Family mourns Bethesda native killed in Afghanistan

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By Donna St. George
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, March 8, 2010; B01

Anthony Paci met his wife in cyberspace while he was on duty in Iraq, and during six months of e-mails, phone conversations and Skype calls, they fell in love. When Mother's Day rolled around, his gift was a spa day that would bring together, for the first time, his sweetheart, her mother and his mother. "He knew then that this was it, and that was how he arranged for us to meet," his mother, Helene, recalled.

Soon there was an engagement across the miles, then a wedding two days after Paci, an Army specialist who grew up in Bethesda, returned from the war zone and embraced Erica O'Beirne. It was all part of what his mother recalls as "a fairy-tale relationship" between two people who "just totally got each other."

On Sunday, Paci's mother and other relatives gathered around his wife near Tacoma, Wash., to mourn the loss of the dedicated soldier and family man, who was killed Thursday in Afghanistan at the age of 30. He was a father of three: Judah, 2 1/2 , Tallulah, 1 1/2 , and Mila, 3 months.

Paci was killed on his mother's 51st birthday in what military officials described as a [vehicle rollover](#). Family members said they were told the crash happened after Paci, who was in the top position on a fast-moving Stryker in Gereshk, Afghanistan, yelled for his driver to swerve to avoid hitting an oncoming car filled with a family of Afghan civilians.

Helene Paci said that an Army general told the family that her son had done everything by the book in the crash that took his life. "He told us our son was a hero," she said.

On Sunday, Helene Paci looked back on her son's life, which recently revolved around his assignment to the 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, [Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state](#). "He loved his job," she said. "He hated to leave his wife and kids, but he loved his job."

Paci grew up playing combat video games that might have foreshadowed his career, but he arrived in the Army much later, at age 24, inspired partly by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and by the Marines who frequented the District restaurant where he was working as a waiter.

Helene Paci said that her son admired the camaraderie and trust among the Marines he got to know. "It sparked this desire to want to be in the military," she said.

Paci was born the day his great-grandfather died. "He left for boot camp on our wedding anniversary," Helene Paci recalls, a glint of humor penetrating the heartbreak. "He had a knack for doing things so we remembered them."

The son of a businessman and a longtime cashier and office assistant at Giant, Paci had attended [Walt Whitman High School](#) but left a month before graduation in 1997 and later earned a GED.

In the Army, he was a mortarman by training and served in Iraq for a year, from late 2005 to late 2006, marrying his wife upon his return to Fort Hood and taking joy in his children. "He was superdad," his mother said. "He loved his babies."

The youngest of his brood was born Nov. 29, and Paci came back for a two-week visit in December. He arrived in New Jersey, where his wife was staying with her mother temporarily. And when the December snows in Washington kept some people from traveling, Paci and his wife climbed in their car and drove to his childhood home in the Glen Echo Heights section of Bethesda.

"He said, 'Mom, I don't care how many inches of snow are on the ground,' " she recalled.

As she talked by phone, surrounded by her son's children, Helene Paci noted that they will still hear the sound of their father's voice in the "[daddy dolls](#)" they took to bed while he was in Afghanistan. The cloth dolls were made using Paci's photograph and when squeezed include his recorded voice. His eldest daughter's says: "I love you, and I miss you very much, and I can't wait to come home and see you and give you hugs and kisses."

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Army Sgt. Anthony A. Paci of Maryland buried at Arlington

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By Christy Goodman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, March 26, 2010; B02

Army Sgt. Anthony A. Paci's friends and family spoke about how the 30-year-old served his country but, more importantly, made the most of his life.

On Thursday morning, more than 200 people attended services in Bethesda to honor the soldier's life. Most of them later followed Paci's caisson to his final resting spot in Arlington National Cemetery.

[Paci died March 4 at Gereshk, Afghanistan, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.](#) Family members were told that Paci, who was in the top position on a Stryker vehicle, yelled for his driver to swerve to avoid an oncoming car filled with an Afghan family. His vehicle rolled over, killing him and injuring two others.

"The measure of his life is far greater than the number of years he lived, but this you all know," Capt. Rick Thompson, an Army chaplain, said at the services at Pumphrey Funeral Home in Bethesda. "For what we do with our time is the greatest measure of our lives."

Paci attended Walt Whitman High School, but he left a month before graduation in 1997. He earned a general equivalency diploma and later joined the Army.

He served as a mortar man in Iraq for one year. Within days of his return in 2006, he married Erica O'Beirne Paci, whom he had met online. Together, they had three children: Judah 2 1/2 ; Tallulah, 1 1/2 ; and Mila, 3 months.

From the tone in his voice and the look in his eye, it was "undeniable [that his children] were a source of constant joy," his brother Nicholas Paci said at the services.

Nicholas Paci described his brother as "a fool in love" with Erica. "The power of true love is not easy to attain," he said, but the couple had triumphed.

Nicholas said Sgt. Paci was the best brother he or his other brother, Marco, could ask for. Tony Matthews, a cousin and namesake of Sgt. Paci, said he is now "intensely proud" to have the honor.

"Tony lived his life in service of his country," Nicholas Paci said. "I know he is smiling that great, big smile of his down on all of us."

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), who often attends the funerals of Maryland service members killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan, praised Paci's parents, Helene and Leo, for having raised a son "with the calling to serve."

The governor said the entire state mourns with the Paci family, adding, "We can never repay the tremendous sacrifice made by your family."

Army Staff Sgt. Sean Jones, a family friend, described Paci as "a giant who once walked among our ranks."

Jones and other Army officials posthumously promoted Paci to sergeant and awarded him a Bronze Star. Paci was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry, 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state.

As members of the Army's Old Guard fired three volleys, Sgt. Paci's family and friends drew closer around his wife, three children and parents. The crowd took a few steps closer in support of the immediate members as Brig. Gen. Mark Milley presented a flag to Erica Paci. Another flag was presented to Helene and Leo Paci.

The crowd drew tighter when it was time to present flags to the Paci children.

Members of the Old Guard dropped to their knees and leaned over to the children, handing off the flags to a family member because the children's hands were too small to hold them.

A baby's cry floated over the grave site.

As of Thursday, 131 casualties from the war in Afghanistan and 598 from both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had been laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery.

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